"What has become of courtesy, consideration, empathy and compassion?", I wondered.

Although I might have been thinking about our political leadership, I was recalling specifically the children I meet: so often rude and discourteous, not only to their elders but also to their peers as though being insulting were an art form.

Is it because their parents have taught them thus? When I was young, my mother stayed at home until both my brother and I were in school. When we misbehaved we were separated until my father came home to adjudicate disputes. How often he admonished me to "think of the other fella!" How many children these days hear such sentiments? On one occasion my brother and I had been in a terrible scrap; my sentence was to go to my room and write out my side; then, the most arduous and demanding of tasks, to write out my brother's case in the dispute.

Would parents today impose such an education on their offspring? Perhaps, but not directly, I think; after all what fraction of parents play a significant role in their children's upbringing these days? With the prevalence of two income families, latchkey kids, and soccer moms and dads, parents are often fleeting, also-ran influences on the children nominally under their tutelage. Who or what then is the major influence on their approach towards dealing with others?

Some would argue children's peers, a totally unsatisfactory explanation, which begs the question where they get their upbringing. It occurs to me that for the most part children's training in relationships and attitudes towards others may come from television and videogames. If so, the prospect is daunting! As I watch television with the eye of a child, I am often struck not just by the physical violence but the mental and emotional trauma inflicted on others, not just in dramas, comedies, and cartoons but significantly, perhaps principally, in advertisements.

Really look and listen to them: what is commonly celebrated? Dishonesty, deceit, treachery, deception: it's appalling. Men are often depicted as moronic idiots, women as conniving manipulators. Of course, ostensibly and superficially it's usually "in fun", but what's the underlying message to children? Being toxic to others is cute, funny, gets admiring attention from the audience or observer if not the actual participants in the transaction.

On radio dramas of my youth - the Lone Ranger, the Shadow, Mr. Keen, Captain Midnight - the messages I heard were quite different. People, good people, treated each other far differently from the behavior I observe so often modeled in the predominantly visual media today. There were bad people but they were definitely not celebrated. Where in television today are people treated humanely, with respect and consideration, without condescension, now that Mr. Rogers is gone?
And video games? My gawd! Other humans are cannon-fodder to be butchered and slaughtered without consideration or remorse! No wonder the military use them to train their special action squads! Desensitization to cyborg status.

I am not sure that there is much that can be done in this our culture, so emmeshed are we in a medium constantly mainlining a virulent brew of antisocial "entertainment", but perhaps atuned parents could ask their kids once in a while, "How do you think it feels to be" the other person, the victim of the ridicule, betrayal, deceit, physical and emotional violence that flashes across the flickering screen. Think about the other fella; try a few minutes or miles in his or her shoes. While you're at it, catalogue and inventory the number of times you witness dehumanizing, demeaning treatment of others within your field of view.

What is becoming of us as people?

(c) Copyright 2003 by AxisofLogic.com